

'MEADY' THE HERO AS WANDERERS BOUNCE BACK

ROTHMANS Isthmian League champions Wycombe Wanderers captured an invaluable three points from Division One leaders Leatherhead in a thrilling top-of-the-table encounter at Loakes Park on Tuesday night. And the man who made it all possible was Keith Mead.

He was by far the outstanding defender on the field and was never once beaten in the air by a Leatherhead attack that has rapped 33 goals this season — more than any other club. And to cap his brilliant defensive performance, he stole up in the 76th minute to secure the honours with a powerful header that sent the fans wild with delight. It was a fitting reward for his efforts.

This was only the Tanners' third reverse this season and it avenged the Blues earlier 1-2 defeat at Fetcham Grove in September. Many felt they deserved a share of the spoils on that night and there can be no doubts about which team earned the verdict at Loakes Park.

Wanderers, whose work rate has been suspect in recent matches, began tentatively in the first half although controlling the game territorially, they could not dominate events. More hard work after the interval saw them maintain their advantage until the goal. Once the breakthrough had been achieved, they peppered the visitors mercilessly and only two world class saves by the veteran John Swannell prevented a heavier defeat.

This victory was vital to Wycombe after two successive draws against Hayes and Dulwich Hamlet. They needed the three points to keep them up amongst the leaders and this obviously motivated them considerably.

STILL FOURTH

The other important results on Tuesday night — Enfield's 4-3 victory at Ilford and Dagenham's 2-2 draw with Dulwich — means that the Blues are still in fourth place. But their victory over the leaders will be a warning to future opponents.

Leatherhead's free scoring attack and inventive midfield were never allowed to shine by Wycombe's watertight defence while the midfield trio worked tigerishly to stamp out the threat of Willie Smith and John Cooper. Howard Kennedy kept a firm grip on Smith and still managed to play some telling passes while Terry Reardon's distribution was a marked improvement on Saturday's performance. For once Mick Holifield had an off night although he did come into his own in the closing stages.

Wycombe's strikers took their time to get going with Keith Searle struggling to get into the game early on. After half time, however, all three looked formidable opposition with Searle showing occasional flashes of brilliance in the last few minutes.

It was Leatherhead, however, who carved out the first chance of the game after just five minutes. Top goalscorer Pete Lavers, who has found the target 16 times already this term, beat Alan Phillips at the angle of the penalty area and took the ball to the bye-line. He drew John Maskell off his line and crossed perfectly for Chris Kelly but Mead struck out a boot to deflect the ball away.

Wanderers hit back with Swannell cutting out a low centre from Perrin and in the 15th minute Horseman drove powerfully but straight at Swannell following a corner. After that, they won most of the possession but their attacks looked lethargic and too slow to worry the Tanners' defence. Occasionally too, they became over-elaborate and played too close. By keeping it simple, they looked far more likely to score.

Phillips, who was a little shaky early on, forced John Cooper to a narrow angle and the side

Wycombe Wanderers 1, Leatherhead 0 STUART EARP at Loakes Park

netting when the lanky midfield man broke through in the 23rd minute but soon afterwards the visitors only just cleared a hectic scramble in their six yard box and then Horseman's challenge beat Dave Reid but Swannell raced out like a hare to block Bodger's shot. Searle climaxed an interesting first half with a difficult volley, but again Swannell was there to save.

After the break, Wycombe took 10 minutes to regain their supremacy but during that time, Leatherhead failed to put any pressure on the home side. Lavers and Kelly were given no room to weave their dangerous patterns and the Blues almost took the lead with 57 minutes gone.

The Tanners' defence was stretched to the limit by Searle's astute header which fell just right for Reardon to dive full length in the six yard box. Terry met the ball well with his head but sent it straight at Swannell. Thirty seconds later, Horseman dummed the defence but the ball slid just out of Searle's reach on the slippery surface.

Mead got in the way of a vicious drive by Smith in the 63rd minute — a distinctly painful experience but one which could well have prevented a goal — while at the other end, Searle had half a chance to shoot when well placed before being 'swallowed up' by the

massed Leatherhead defences.

At this stage the ball was just not running for the Blues but more pressure eventually brought them the deciding goal with 76 minutes of the match gone.

IRONIC

The goal came from Kennedy's corner which had to be retaken. It was one of the few to the far post and Mead, left unmarked, sent a crashing header over full back Barry Webb on the line and into the net for a glorious goal. Ironically, Keith had hit the post from the previous corner with the whistle already blown for the kick to be retaken. Leatherhead should have taken heed to the warning for the flag kick went exactly to the same man.

One would have thought this reverse would have brought the leaders' attack out of its shell. But it wasn't so much a case of Wycombe holding out for the final 14 minutes, as Leatherhead battling not to concede further goals.

Four minutes after Mead's breakthrough Reardon fired a long range free kick just over Swannell's crossbar and then the goalkeeper produced two wonder saves in the space of a minute to demonstrate just why he won 61 caps for his country.

Searle set up the first chance for Perrin who was just inside

the area when he hammered the ball towards the net in the 81st minute. Swannell, though, raced off his line and somehow managed to parry the drive with his hands. Almost before he could get back into his goal he raced out again to foil Holifield — again at point blank range.

Those moves had the visitors in a real tangle and looking anything but the Division One leaders. Swannell just managed to grab Webb's hasty back pass and just 60 seconds from time Paul Birdseye ballooned a high cross into the six yard box. The Wycombe crowd, who played a part in worrying the Leatherhead defence in these situations, roared again as Swannell missed his attempted punch and the ball dribbled towards the net. Only Derek Wells prevented a certain second goal by rushing across to clear off the line.

Leatherhead did make a last ditch attempt for an equaliser in the last seconds but Wycombe were in no mood to surrender three hard won and thoroughly deserved points.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye. A. Phillips. K. Mead. G. Hand; H. Kennedy. T. Reardon. M. Holifield; K. Searle. A. Horseman. S. Perrin. Sub. G. Mackenzie (not used).

LEATHERHEAD: J. Swannell; D. Sargeant. D. Wells. D. Reid. B. Webb; J. Cooper. W. Smith. C. Woffenden; C. Kelly. P. Lavers. J. Doyle. Sub. P. Dade (not used).

Referee: P. Taylor (Greenford).
Half-time: 0-0. **Goalscorer** — Mead (76).

Official paying attendance: 1,471.
Approximate total attendance: 1,800.